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FINE ARTS.

No. I.

ON THE ART OF ENGRAVING MONUMENTAL BRASSES.

*The Thanks of the Society were presented to Mr. J. W.
ARCHER, of Clarendon Street, Somers Town, for his
Communication on the Art of Engraving Monumental
Brasses.*

IN laying before the Society the following notes on the subject of Monumental Brasses, I am influenced by two motives,—first, a desire to testify to their intrinsic merit as well as to their historic value,—and, secondly to embody some brief description of my views in attempting a revival of the art itself.

On the first point, I may allude to the great antiquity, the peculiarly national character, and, in not a few instances, the extreme beauty of design, which characterise these memorials of the eminent ecclesiastics, warriors, and statesmen of our early history, and which render their study of much general importance.

Thus, in the investigation of our ancient Monumental Brasses, the sculptor and the historical painter will find an infallible guide to those peculiarities of costume, armour, and other accoutrements, the knowledge of which is necessary to correct and effective representation.

Even the portraiture of such works, though rudely de-

lineated, is found worthy of consideration in connexion with a period whereof we possess few vestiges of personal likeness,—nothing more, indeed, than occasional instances of miniature illumination, an art more commonly exercised in the representation of merely ideal personages, or of the handiwork of the carver in stone or in wood, few of whose productions have, from the nature of the material, escaped the mutilation of their prominent features, either by violence or accident.

Moreover, the historian will find, in many instances, that he has not perused in vain the quaint and antiquated legends set forth by the curious worker in brass.

The herald may discover, daintily emblazoned in the enamel of centuries, the cunning devices of his learned and time-honoured science; and even the puzzled lawyer, when fire and mildew have done their work upon such documents as consume or shrivel, has been known to discover, in some neglected nook, the important desideratum,—the golden link in the chain of evidence, even as it was graven by the hand of the antique workman, “deeply and well cut, and undercut, and securely riveted through the stone,” and where it may have survived the hallowed pile which originally overshadowed it, through all the mutations of style—early English, the enriched Gothic, the declining style of the sixteenth, and the utter confusion of styles of the eighteenth century.

I may here give a brief sketch of the progress of the art which is the subject of these notes. That it may be traced to the period immediately succeeding the Conquest, I have had evidence in a rubbing from a monumental inscription in the Roman character, and of the date of that period, but we do not discover the evidence of design until a subsequent era. The most ancient sepulchral

brass of this description is dedicated to Sir John d'Abernon, about the year 1300, in Stoke d'Abernon Church, Surrey. This monument contains much that is curious, the chain mail in which the effigy is clad is most accurately engraven, and may challenge comparison with any subsequent work of a similar character. The figure is rude in design; the shield bears the family arms, the field being azure in enamel, and preserves to this day all its original brilliancy. Round the edge of the stone is a border of Longobardic characters in Norman French; the letters are of metal, inserted singly in the stone. This is uncommon, and but few such examples are met with. Nutfield Church, in Surrey, possesses a stone which has evidently been treated in this way. Another beautiful example is to be found in Cobham Church, Kent, in a very fine monument to Lady Cobham, surmounted by a canopy of the early English character. This style seems to have prevailed almost throughout England till the period of the Reformation with evidences of decline from the early part of the sixteenth century, but it is in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that we find monumental brasses in their perfection. The monument of Sir Thomas Cheyon conveys a good notion of a warrior of his period, Edward III. The head is grave and of a knightly bearing, and the accoutrements highly illustrative. A most beautiful brass exists in Westminster Abbey, dedicated to the Duchess of Gloucester, in the time of Richard II.; the effigy is evidently a likeness, and the simple lines of the drapery are perfectly well disposed. It is surmounted by a triform canopy full of exquisite details. This style of monument, which is in its highest condition, appears to have maintained a character peculiarly English; as, although such works are to be

found in Flanders and Brabant, they are, in their various styles, all strikingly different from those found in this country. Germany appears destitute of these monuments. France possessed them previously to the Revolution; an example is to be found in Dusommerard's "*Histoire des Arts du Moyen Age*," the monument of Geoffrey le Bel. Plantagenet and in Franconia a peculiar kind of monument is found in figures of ecclesiastics, wrought in low relief on brass. At Wurzburg and Bamberg they are numerous. But, when we begin to mark the signs of degeneration in the art in our brasses, the character of nationality likewise disappears. The vigour, and primitive, but characteristic type of form, were lost, the earnestness of the artist had departed, the evidences of faith were no longer to be found, and the aid of the plodding, unimaginative Fleming was called in. There, in place of conception, we have misdirected labour. The meaner types of form, too weak to stand by themselves, were then to be bolstered up by hatching and cross hatching, and, in unseemly shading, sinking the firm surface and breadth of effect peculiar to the more ancient examples, without obtaining any adequate compensation in the imperfect attempt at the effect of relief thus obtained. Instances of this manner are to be found in St. Mary's Church, Ipswich, and All Hallows, Barking.

The art of working in monumental brass having long sunk into disuse, and a general decline having taken place in architectural taste and knowledge, together with a corresponding departure from all appropriateness in monumental sculpture, our ancient and venerable churches have been profaned by the unhallowed extravagances of an uncontrolled caprice. The practice, with some exceptions, was left to the unsafe guardianship of inferior minds,

and the absurd results are conspicuous in the most venerable of those structures reared by ancient piety for peaceful and solemn meditation, as well as for the higher offices of religious worship. Here may be seen the stubborn marble tortured into the minute resemblance of the curls of a full-bottomed wig, or ingeniously made to mimic the hempen strands of a first-rate cable.

Lower and lower had sunk the business of modern ecclesiastical sculpture, until it became a mere time-serving and wages-earning trade. The same lady weeping visible tears over her urn or sarcophagus, having served its turn in one instance, was equally appropriate to the next customer; and the same flutter of rags and cupids within the walls of nine churches out of ten, presents its unmeaning monotony, or is curiously varied by the trophies of thigh-bones and grinning skulls, and profusely garnished with a choice assortment of the most approved symbols borrowed from the heathen mythology. Having for some years past been interested in the observation and study of ecclesiastical antiquities, this condition of our churches has strikingly impressed me with the expediency of its reformation; and seeing in the improving spirit of the times a general revival of architectural taste, promoted and fostered by an enlightened clergy, by powerful associations, and by personages whose accomplishments and wealth well entitle them to assume an honourable and important position as the patrons of art and science, and feeling how much it behoves each professor of these arts to shew himself by his utmost exertion not wholly unworthy of such encouragement, I have been emboldened to undertake, as my share in this endeavour, the revival of the ancient method of engraving in monumental brass; the following considerations in support of which may be worthy of notice.

First, the economy and durability of engraved metal, calculated, especially in times of harmony and reverence for consecrated places, to endure through many centuries ; and, secondly, the interference with church architecture by the projection of marble monuments and tablets, in many instances extending to actual risk of the durability of the fabric on which they are engrafted, by cutting away parts of pillars, and often even portions of the wall itself.

For this I propose to offer a remedy in the adoption of engraved metal, which may be let into the wall as a mural tablet, presenting a level surface, or laid in the pavement. Or, in cases where the chancel will allow sufficient space, the brass may be placed upon a raised tomb, affording considerable room upon its sides for successive tablets as family memorials.

In conclusion, I beg to state that I have already found encouragement in this my endeavour. I have now completed the fifth monument in this manner, the first whereof I believe I may say was the only example of the art during a period of at least a century. This was a monument dedicated to the memory of Dr. Davy, late of Caius College (now placed in the chapel of that college), and from whose enlightened executor, the Rev. Mr. Smith of Caius College, I received a gratifying testimonial.

Of my latter production I have had the honour to lay before the Society a rubbing, being induced to offer the subject to its notice from my conviction of the high value of its sanction.

J. W. ARCHER.

Somers Town, January, 1844.